



artist daily  
*presents*

# WATERCOLOR LESSONS ON DEPTH AND LUMINOSITY

*10 Watercolor Painting  
Techniques from  
Artist Daily*

# Skin-tones & Colors that Shine

ALI CAVANAUGH DISCOVERED WAYS & MEANS TO CREATE RICHLY NUANCED FIGURE PAINTINGS IN WATERCOLOR.

by Lynne Moss Perricelli

**A**li Cavanaugh prefers watercolor as a medium, but her approach is more like that of an oil painter. Building up multiple layers, slowly blending the paints to the desired color and value, she achieves a remarkable depth and luminosity, especially in the skin tones. Such a labor-intensive approach and an unconventional application of watermedia requires a special surface, which Cavanaugh discovered in Ampersand's Aquabord, a plaster panel cradled in birch plywood and covered with kaolin clay. The artist describes the surface as "pebbly," conveying a rich texture that holds the paint well. Best of all, the wet surface allows the paint to remain workable over a long period of time.



ABOVE  
*Falling Through Your Redolence*  
2008, watercolor, 30 x 22.  
Courtesy Bering & James  
Gallery, Houston, Texas.



Perfected Through a Fall  
2008, watercolor, 50 x 40.  
Collection the artist.

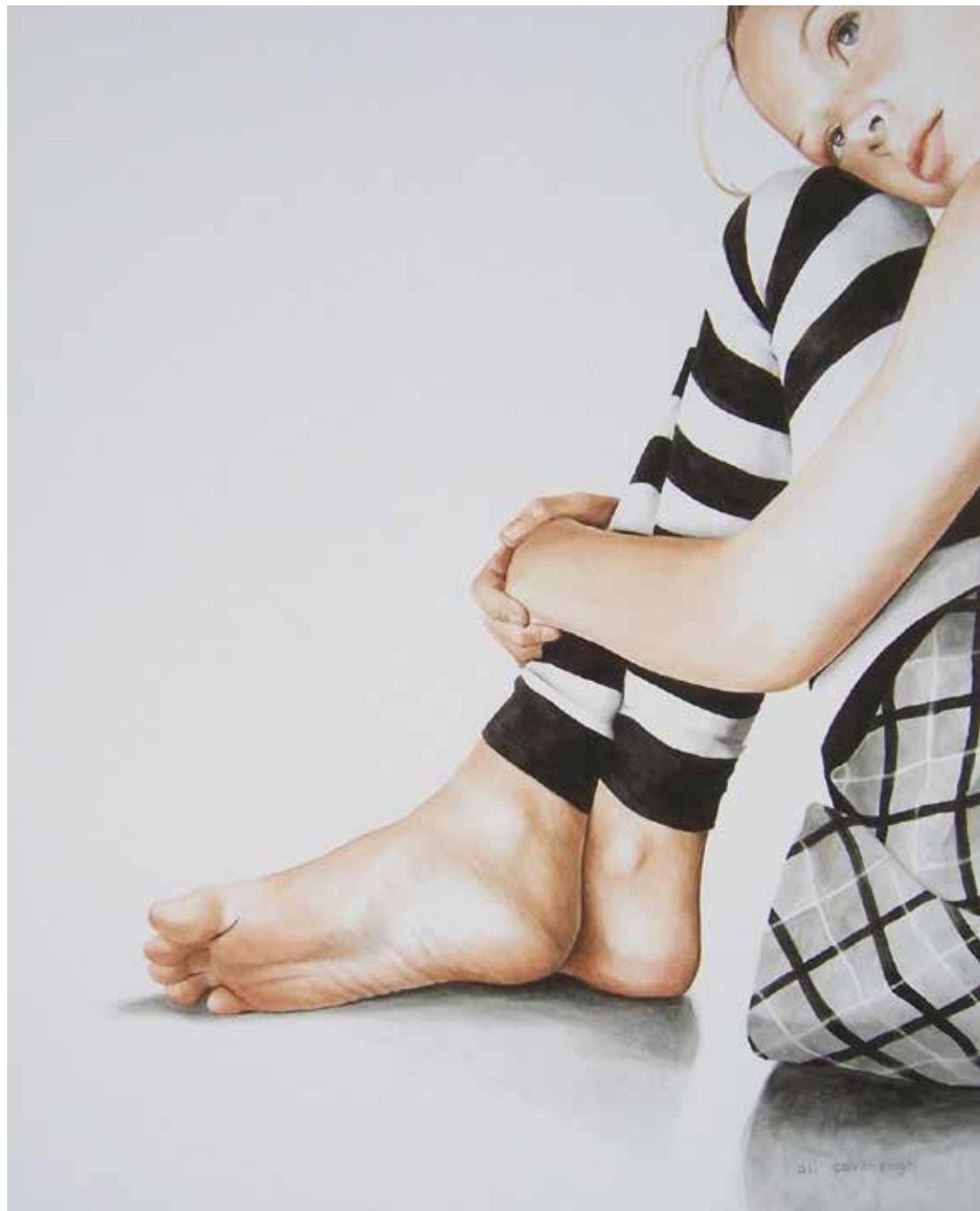
Cavanaugh begins any new work by first arranging a photo shoot. Her models are typically her daughter and nieces, and she dresses them in clothes from her own collection of vintage fabrics. "The magic for me is in dressing the figure and doing the photo shoot," Cavanaugh says. "The creative part of my process is mostly in capturing the figure in a pose that is emotional." She spends a great deal of time deciding

what the figure will wear. "The clothing sets the tone, but more important it allows me to bring together the two things I love the most: fabric and the figure. Painting the fabric and the patterns motivates me."

**Setting up her digital camera on a tripod, she takes some 200 to 300 photos. She engages the model in conversation to find a natural, compelling pose.** She then uploads the

photos to her computer, where she can view and manipulate them with Photoshop software. "I choose one photo or a couple of photos and piece them together," the artist describes. "I eliminate some elements, change everything to black and white. I cut and paste from other photos, keeping everything on the screen."

Once she has determined the composition, she selects a panel and



I Remember How  
It Used To Be  
2007, watercolor,  
20 x 16. Private collection.



RIGHT

Why Not  
2008, watercolor, 14 x 18.  
Collection the artist.

BELOW

Twice  
2007, watercolor, 12 x 12.  
Private collection.



makes a light graphite drawing. She then wets the surface and begins painting. The graphite dissolves when the water and pigment contact the surface. "I have no set formula," she explains. "Every painting starts out in its own way. Sometimes I work from light to dark, sometimes I don't." Cavanaugh likens her process to egg tempera in that she uses multiple tiny strokes to build up the color in layers, and although she is responding to the work as it progresses, the process is slow and meticulous. **She typically begins with a 1" sable flat to lay in the background areas, then uses smaller brushes, down to a .2.** "I go through about four brushes per painting," she notes. "The sandpaperlike texture of the surface wears out the brushes quickly."

She arranges her paints—by Daniel Smith, for the most part—on ceramic tiles in clusters of colors: one for skin, one for hair, and one for fabric. After spraying the paints to keep them wet, she adds a lot of water to the pigment and mixes some color on the palette.



Putting on  
Perfection  
2008, watercolor, 30 x 22.  
Collection the artist.

She allows each layer of paint to dry before she applies the next, which prevents the previous layers from lifting. Her skin tones typically consist of varying degrees of the following paints: yellow ochre, cadmium red light, cadmium red medium, a variety of purples, sap green, burnt umber,

burnt sienna, and Van Dyck brown. In painting the fabrics, she layers complementary colors to build depth. For gray fabrics, she combines lamp black, Payne's gray, indigo, and cerulean blue.

As Cavanaugh layers the paint, she reworks certain areas as necessary by

lifting out the paint with clean brushes and paper towels. She also pulls out highlights and makes other adjustments. "I don't know how to explain it other than to say I just go into it and layer the paint. I just keep working until it looks good," she says. A painting generally consists of up to

RIGHT

A Boat for You Within My Arms  
2008, watercolor, 30 x 30. Courtesy Wally  
Workman Gallery, Austin, Texas.

BELOW

6, 7, 8, 9, 10  
2008, watercolor, 16 x 20. Collection the artist.

50 layers. When a piece is complete, Cavanova applies three to four coats of acrylic matte spray to seal and protect the surface, using three coats of Minwax Polycrylic on the plywood sides. **She hangs the small pieces with a sawtooth hanger on the back of the cradle and rubber bumpers at the bottom so that the piece hangs perfectly against the wall.** Larger pieces require D rings to the back of the cradle and a wire for hanging.

Cavanaugh believes her interest in the figure has its origin in her hearing loss, which resulted from spinal meningitis when she was 15 months old. "I have a small amount of hearing in one ear," she says, "but out in the world I have to depend on reading lips and body language. This has made me very attuned to others, to the unspoken language of the figure. I love the structure of the figure, but the unseen dimension of the figure is what strikes me so deeply." She began painting commissioned portraits in high school, and even in college, she always returned to the figure. In 2004, after the birth of her daughter, the figure took on even greater meaning as she observed her daughter's growth and how it made her think of her own childhood. Creating images of girls has presented "an entry point into my own past experiences," she says.

The artist, even since art school, has been known for her use of negative space. "**I overstate the negative space,**" she says, "**and I suppose it's because it quiets the composition. It creates a silence.** Maybe it's because of my hearing loss. Maybe it's just to isolate the





ABOVE  
*Separate My Thought  
From Yours*  
2008, watercolor, 18 x 28.  
Collection the artist.

LEFT  
*Within a Graceful  
Melody*  
2007, watercolor, 30 x 30.  
Private collection.



figure, just like when someone is speaking to me I have to focus completely on that person."

Recently Cavanaugh has embarked on a new series of time-lapse images. So far she has four sets, still in the early stages, in which she shows the same figure at different points in time. She would also like to sew her own clothes for the photo shoots. "I'm limited right now to the clothes in the stores," she explains, "but I would like to get into cutting up clothes and resewing them. I love inside-out clothes—the seams, the threads. I want to play around with them and be more creative with the fabric."

There's no doubt this artist will find a way to make both the process and the paintings uniquely her own. That's what she's always done. ■

# DEMONSTRATION: DOUBTFUL



1

## Step 1

The artist first made a light graphite sketch to establish the composition.



2

## Step 2

Beginning with the bandana, the artist began laying small strokes of color, using a combination of lamp black, Prussian blue, cerulean blue, burnt umber, and sepia. To convey a sense of depth, she worked from light to dark.



3

## Step 3

The artist gradually built up the layers of paint in small strokes.

## Step 4

Cavanaugh next developed the figure's dress, using a combination of French ultramarine, indigo, and burnt umber. Again she worked from light to dark.



4

## Step 5

To create depth in the skin tones, the artist first laid in the darkest darks, using raw sienna and burnt umber. She then used many reds, oranges, and yellows in thin, watery layers. She worked slowly to build the layers evenly and achieve a luminous effect.



5



THE COMPLETED PAINTING:  
*Doubtful*  
2007, watercolor, 20 x 16.  
Collection the artist.

# Painting Freely and Boldly

WITH HIS LOOSE, SPONTANEOUS STYLE OF PAINTING AND HIS ENERGETIC, ENCOURAGING TEACHING STYLE, DOMENIC DISTEFANO PROVES THAT CAPTURING SUBJECT MATTER IN WATERCOLOR CAN BE AN ENJOYABLE AND FREEING EXPERIENCE.

by Allison Malafronte



Fall Scene  
2004–2008,  
watercolor,  
22 x 30. All artwork  
this article collection  
the artist.



Domenic DiStefano retired from nearly 50 years of teaching watercolor classes in his Upper Darby, Pennsylvania, studio five years ago, but his loyal following of students wouldn't let him slip away that easily. At 84, he has gone back to teaching a small group of artists every week, and he does so with as much passion and dedication as he did at the beginning of his career. "I was fortunate enough to have wonderful teachers at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts when I was studying painting who generously gave of their knowledge and time," DiStefano explains. "I always said that I wanted to give to my students what had been given to me, so I continue to teach them everything I know and hold nothing back."

Although DiStefano's art training at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts was in classical oil painting, he discovered early on that watercolor was to be his medium of choice. "Watercolor is my pet," he says. "I've done oils, pastels, graphics, and acrylics, but I still like a clean piece of

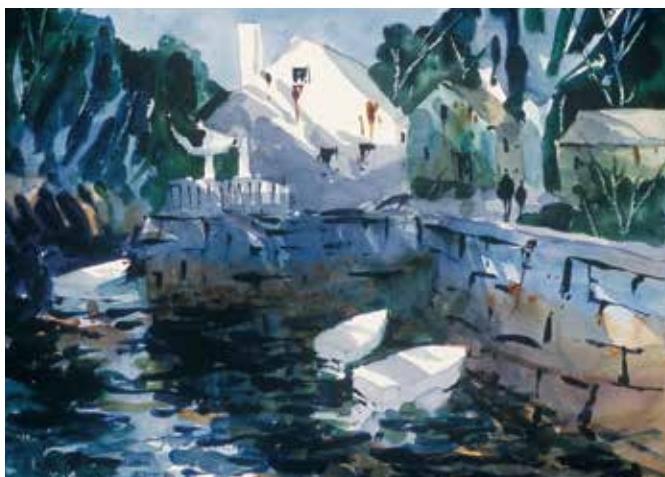
paper and clean pigments. There's nothing I can't do with my nine colors, a large bucket of water, and my watercolor brushes." DiStefano's confident approach to watercolor is one of the attractions of his instruction, especially to those who at first feel intimidated by the medium. "Watercolor is not difficult, and those who think it is just haven't had enough practice with it," he assures. "They say you can't correct in watercolor, but you can. The first rule is not to make mistakes, so you need to spend some time visualizing the process before you put brush to paper."

DiStefano breaks down the watercolor process to his students by stressing design, value, and color, and he demonstrates his direct, expressive technique both in his studio and on-site. When working from nature, he tells students that everything they need is right in front of them and that they should start a painting by taking in their surroundings, imagining what the painting will look like. "I sit out in the field for 15 or 20 minutes, thinking about what I'm going to put on paper," the artist says. "Then I start my painting by doing what I call an 'invisible drawing,' or a mental translation of the design, value, and color from my mind to the canvas. I then make one dot and go from there,

Racing  
2004-2008,  
watercolor,  
22 x 30.



“I always said that I wanted to give to my students what had been given to me, so I continue to teach them everything I know and hold nothing back.”



LEFT  
Ipswich, Mass  
2004–2008,  
watercolor, 22 x 30.

ABOVE  
Sails Are Up  
2004–2008,  
watercolor, 22 x 30.

doing the least amount of drawing possible so as not to be confined by lines. The fewer lines I make, the better I paint.

"I'm a direct painter. I don't use washes," the artist continues. "I paint values, working from dark to light. If I observe a dark note of color, I lay in that dark note right away. If you build up to a color with washes, the painting tends to become labored, flat, and opaque. You can't get that transparent look that's possible by laying down the color directly. Some say a lot of the colors on my palette are opaque, but they're really not. I just have to use more water to make them more transparent, that's all. It's very simple: the more water you add to a pigment, the lighter it becomes. If you understand that from the beginning, you're already on your way to successful watercolors."

Regarding his materials, DiStefano works on 140- or 300-lb Arches paper and uses large sable brushes. His palette includes yellow ochre, raw sienna, burnt sienna, burnt umber, alizarin crimson, cerulean blue, indanthrene blue, indigo blue,



ABOVE  
View of Gloucester  
2004–2008, watercolor,  
22 x 30.

BELOW  
St. Peter's Square  
2004–2008, watercolor,  
22 x 30.





ABOVE  
End of the Race  
2004–2008,  
watercolor, 22 x 30.

LEFT  
Green Shed  
2004–2008,  
watercolor, 22 x 30.



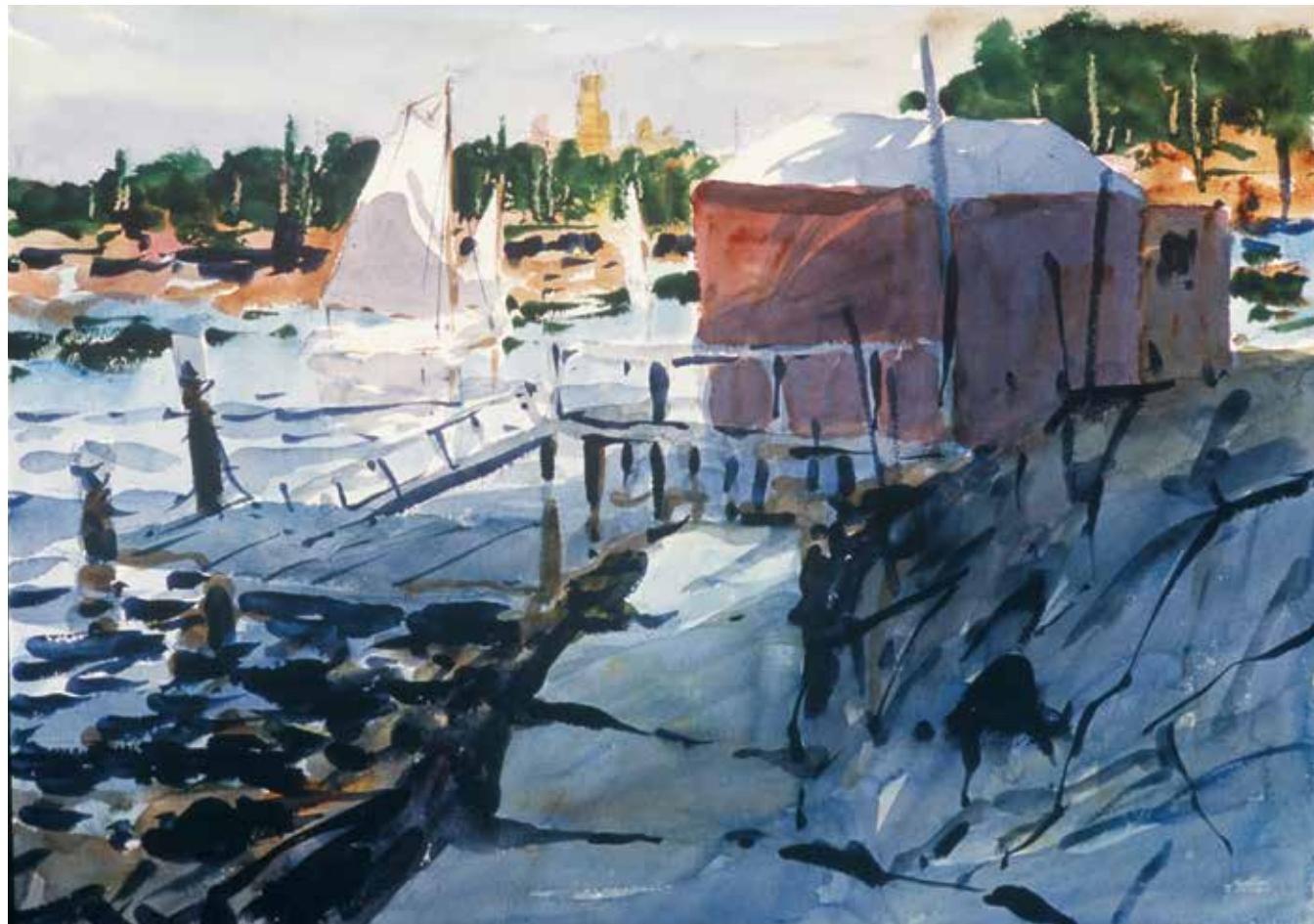
and Hooker's green—shades of each of the three primaries, three earth colors, and a green. "I prefer to work with a limited palette and mix all the colors myself," he says. "When you first start painting, you experiment—adding a color, subtracting a color—and eventually you arrive at a set of colors that works for you." The artist keeps a large bucket of water next to him when painting, explaining that the larger the bucket, the cleaner the water stays at the top.

DiStefano uses the same palette for both his studio and outdoor work, and he spends a good portion of his time painting landscapes during his annual trips to Rockport, near Cape Ann, Massachusetts. His bold, loose colors are well suited to the jagged coastlines and choppy waters that he creates in his nautical scenes, and he is continually inspired by the town's pristine beauty. "The Rockport/Cape Ann area is known for its beautiful light and clean water that constantly changes color," he describes. "There isn't a lot of smog or industry up there so there's a certain purity and natural beauty to the landscape.

"Even with the perfection of what the Good Lord gave us in nature, I still allow myself a lot of freedom in painting

**"They say you can't correct in watercolor, but you can. The first rule is not to make mistakes, so you need to spend some time visualizing the process before you put brush to paper."**

Shack at the North Shore  
2004–2008,  
watercolor, 22 x 30.





## DISTEFANO'S MATERIALS

### Palette

- yellow ochre
- raw sienna
- burnt sienna
- burnt umber
- alizarin crimson
- cerulean blue
- indanthrene blue
- indigo blue
- Hooker's green

### Brushes

- large sable rounds and flats

### Surface

- 140- or 300-lb Arches paper

View From the  
Wind Tunnel  
2004–2008,  
watercolor, 22 x 30.



outdoors and encourage my students to do the same," the artist continues. "Although everything you need is right there in front of you, you can still change elements. If you don't like a tree, you don't have to use it. If you want to rust up a boat for a certain effect, you can do it. You can change and borrow from what surrounds you when you work in nature, but when you work from photographs you are limited to only what the camera captured."

Even after many years of painting and learning to master the various properties of watercolor, DiStefano knows that sometimes the hardest part is just getting started. "Students sometimes ask me, 'How do you start a painting?' And I tell them, 'Just put some darn color down and get started! And when you're done, walk away!'" Clearly, DiStefano likes to make the watercolor process as simple and straightforward for his students as possible, always peppering his instruction with plenty of encouraging candor. "I'm not afraid to be open and frank with my students and to help them paint confidently with no inhibitions. Bold and free—that's how my students describe me." ■

In for the Night  
2004–2008, watercolor,  
22 x 30.



ABOVE

Waiting for the Captain  
2004–2008, watercolor, 22 x 30.

BELOW

Gloucester Harbor  
2004–2008, watercolor, 22 x 30.



## ABOUT THE ARTIST

**DOMINIC DISTEFANO** has painting in watercolor for more than 75 years and has been teaching for nearly 50 years. He is an elected member of many professional associations, including the American Watercolor Society (Dolphin Fellow), Allied Artists of America, North Shore Arts Association, Pennsylvania Watercolor Society, Philadelphia Sketch Club, Salmagundi Club, Philadelphia Watercolor Society, and Rockport Art Association. The artist has won numerous awards, and his work is in both national and international collections. He is the author of *Painting Dynamic Watercolors: Capturing the Spontaneity of Nature* (North Light Books, Cincinnati, Ohio) and continues to offer classes and workshops in both Pennsylvania and Massachusetts. DiStefano is represented by An Artful Touch Gallery, in Rockport, Massachusetts, and The Shore Road Gallery, in Ogunquit, Maine.

# Top Resources for Artists



"I struggled for years with composition, value, color harmony, etc. Then I stumbled upon your Wet Canvas Webinar and, presto, within weeks things just clicked. You have given me the tools to create and blossom. Thank you ever so much!"

—Shirley

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